

Black-backed Cisticola *Cisticola eximius* a new species for Tanzania

Thomas Gottschalk

L'auteur rapporte la découverte de la Cisticole à dos noir *Cisticola eximius* en Tanzanie. En janvier–juin 2000, pendant la saison des pluies, 57 individus, répartis sur 30 sites, ont été recensés dans le nord du Parc National du Serengeti. L'espèce a également été rencontrée en trois sites dans le corridor ouest et au sud de Seronera. Elle se trouvait le plus souvent dans les prairies luxuriantes à *Themeda*, hautes de 70–120 cm. Les raisons possibles de la découverte tardive de *C. eximius* en Tanzanie sont examinées. Les différences concernant la morphologie et le choix d'habitat des oiseaux observés dans le Serengeti par rapport à ce qui est mentionné dans la littérature sont indiquées.

During ornithological surveys in the north part of Serengeti National Park, a *Cisticola* not previously recorded in the country was identified. The first record of Black-backed Cisticola *Cisticola eximius* was made on 17 January 2000 at 02°31'S 34°51'E. This individual was perched on a small bush singing in the early morning. As it was not shy it was possible to obtain good views. Observed through 10 x 42 binoculars its structure and plumage appeared similar to that of Zitting Cisticola *Cisticola juncidis* but the tail was longer and the unmarked chestnut crown was obvious. Clearly visible was the cream-coloured eye-ring and supraloral stripe contrasting with the dark lores. The mantle was very dark brown, almost black streaked and the belly, chin and throat whitish with pale buff underparts. Its song was clearly different to other cisticolas heard in the park, including the flight song, which always contained the same repeated series of notes. The height at which the flight song was delivered varied greatly, from a high aerial cruise to just a few metres above the ground. It never wing-snapped in flight *contra* *Birds of Africa*². In north Serengeti Black-backed Cisticola could be confused with Pectoral-patch *C. brunnescens* and Zitting Cisticolas, as all three are similar in size and all perform song flights. The song of *C. eximius* is not monotonous and sharp, like *C. juncidis*. Its repeated flight notes are softer, unlike the hard, dry and sometimes accelerating *tsip* calls of *C. brunnescens*. Also, the cruising flight of *C. eximius* is usually higher.

As the song of *C. eximius* is easily remembered, I discovered more of the species. Between 17 January

and 5 June 2000 I obtained c30 records of *C. eximius* involving more than 57 individuals. The species appears to be common in the high grasslands in the north part of Serengeti, especially on both sides of the Mara River and north to the Kenyan border at Lamai (01°31'S–01°32'S 34°50'E–34°51'E), at 1,430 m. Three additional sightings in the park were further south, in the Western Corridor (02°16'S 34°28'E) at 1,330 m and south of Seronera (02°28'S 34°51'E) at 1,590 m. That at Seronera is the southernmost record ever. As the birds have a distinctive far-carrying song most of the records were made by call.

In the same habitat I noted Zitting Cisticola, Pectoral-patch Cisticola, Stout Cisticola *C. robustus*, Winding Cisticola *C. galactotes* and Croaking Cisticola *C. natalensis*, as well as Rufous-naped Lark *Mirafra africana*, Rosy-breasted Longclaw *Macronyx ameliae* and White-winged *Euplectes ardens* and Yellow-mantled Widowbirds *Euplectes macrourus*.

Discussion

In East Africa *C. eximius* is frequent at 2,100–2,400 m in north-west Ethiopia, rare in Eritrea and uncommon and local south of c10°N in Sudan². While locally common at 900–1,500 m in Uganda, in Kenya the species was only formerly frequent in the south-west, at c1,200 m near Mumias and Yala, but no recent records are available^{2,3}. There are no previous records from Tanzania¹⁻³.

In Kenya, Black-backed Cisticola was recorded in open short-grass meadows that were dry or seasonally flooded³. In Serengeti National Park only

Table 1. Measurements (in mm) of three individuals of Black-backed Cisticola *Cisticola eximius* trapped in mist-nets in April and June 2000. Blood samples were taken from the second and third individuals, which are retained by A J Helbig (Vogelwarte Hiddensee, Germany).

	Date	South	East	Bill	Tarsus	Tail	Overall length	Wing
1	15 April	01°29.947	34°50.122	9.0	18.6	33.7	103.5	49.0
2	3 June	01°30.674	34°49.053	9.8	20.35	28.6	98.5	48.0
3	3 June	01°30.674	34°49.053	9.2	18.85	31.4	98.5	48.0

a few individuals were recorded in short-grass meadows, which have recently been heavily grazed by ungulates. In such areas song was always given from a perch. Most were observed in mid-height grasses, c70–120 cm tall, occasionally on moist ground. The most widespread grass species were *Themeda triandra*, *Sporobolus fimbriatus* and *Chloris gayana*. North of the Mara River Black-backed Cisticola also uses 100–120 cm-high *Themeda* grassland with scattered *Acacia* (some up to 4 m tall). Small open-grassland patches within *Acacia* parkland were also utilised.

As several records of Black-backed Cisticola were made close to the Kenyan border the species may also be common in the southern Masai Mara, where habitats appear similar to those in Tanzania. It is surprising that so many records of the species were made in the wet season in Serengeti, given the relative lack of previous records from Tanzania or the Masai Mara. The records may result from a genuine expansion of the species' range or may be indicative of the relative lack of attention most observers pay cisticolas. Few ornithologists have visited the northern Serengeti as the roads are sometimes very bad, especially during the wet season, and because of problems with poachers.

Compared to the breeding males illustrated by Urban *et al*² and Zimmermann *et al*³ those seen in Serengeti National Park had noticeably longer tails. Though the Serengeti birds were in breeding plum-

age their tail lengths matched illustrations of non-breeding individuals in Urban *et al*² and Zimmermann *et al*³.

Additional research is required to determine if the small population of Black-backed Cisticola in north Tanzania will persist, given that the principal threat to the species' habitat is man-made fire.

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Burgerstraße 2, 61476 Kronberg, Germany. E-mail: thomasgottschalk@hotmail.com.

The status of Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina* in Morocco

Valéry Schollaert^a and Gilles Willem^b

Cette note rapporte l'observation de neuf Traquets isabelles *Oenanthe isabellina* au Maroc, entre les 13 et 17 mars 2001. Ces données confirment la régularité, déjà soupçonnée, de l'espèce dans le pays. Ce traquet est vraisemblablement régulier en petit nombre dans le sud-est du Maroc, en février-mars, période pendant laquelle un passage pré-nuptial important est constaté en Algérie.

Between 13 and 17 March 2001, we birded arid areas of south-east Morocco, noting migrant passerines such as Northern Wheatear *Oenanthe oenanthe* and Willow Warbler *Phylloscopus trochilus*. For most species, it appears that individuals we saw were among the first to cross the Sahara that spring. The surprise was Isabelline Wheatear *Oenanthe isabellina*, which we recorded on several occasions with a total of nine individuals (see Appendix). We managed to take some photographs (see Fig 3) and all records have been submitted to the Moroccan Rare Birds Committee.

Isabelline Wheatear is considered an accidental visitor to Morocco¹: the 19 previous records concern individuals between 25 January and 26 April, principally in February (six) and March (seven). All but five records are from the south-east of the country, with the others from West Saharan Morocco (P Bergier pers comm). Dufourny², who described two Isabelline Wheatears seen near Touroug (west of Erfoud), on 16 February 1993, considered the species as possibly regular as a spring migrant throughout south-east Morocco. Indeed, more regular occurrence of Isabelline Wheatear in Morocco during early spring